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XVII.—KLEIST AT BOULOGNE-SUR-MER

In October, 1803, Kleist secretly left Paris and traveled alone and without the customary passports to the northern coast of France, to the vicinity of Boulogne-sur-mer. In and near this city Napoleon I. was assembling a vast army, with munitions and transports, for the ostensible purpose of making a descent upon England. Kleist wished to enter this army and share its fate on English soil, in the hope of a soldier's death.

The most direct and reliable information we have concerning this episode in Kleist's life is given us in his letter to Ulrike von Kleist dated at St. Omer, in the district Pas-de-Calais about 45 km. inland from Boulogne, Oct. 26, 1803:

“Meine theure Ulrike! Was ich dir schreiben werde, kann dir vielleicht das Leben kosten; aber ich musz, ich musz, ich musz es vollbringen. Ich habe in Paris mein Werk, so weit es fertig war, durchgelesen, verworfen und verbrannt: und nun ist es aus. Der Himmel versagt mir den Ruhm, das Gröszte der Güter der Erde: ich werfe ihm, wie ein eigensinniges Kind alle übrigen hin. Ich kann mich deiner Freundschaft nicht würdig zeigen, ich kann ohne diese Freundschaft doch nicht leben: ich stürze mich in den Tod. Sei ruhig, du Erhabene, ich werde den schönen Tod der Schlachten sterben. Ich habe die Hauptstadt dieses Landes verlassen, ich bin an seine Nordküste gewandert, ich werde französische Kriegsdienste nehmen, das Heer wird bald nach England hinüber rudern, unser aller Verderben lauert über den Meeren,

ich frohlocke bei der Aussicht auf das unendlich prächtige Grab. O du Geliebte, du wirst mein letzter Gedanke sein."

The biographers from Tieck (1821) to Meyer-Benfey (1911) and Herzog (1911) have had almost as much difficulty with this part of Kleist's life as with the journey to Würzburg, and the most recent are in certain respects more unsatisfactory than many of their predecessors.

If we compare their accounts in chronological order we see that the story is complete in detail by 1863. We note a distinct increase in the degree of abnormality ascribed to Kleist. We have no longer a mere recital of the succession of events, but an interpretation, a motivation. A tendency to minimize the importance of details drawn from rather uncertain oral tradition, or to reject them, is accompanied by an injection of theoretical elements drawn from later portions of their subject's life. There is everywhere much dependence of phraseology and still greater dependence of matter, but here and there subjective variations which seem to have no other basis than the writer's desire to find a meaning in the episode which will satisfy his conception of the poet's character.

This is a legitimate function of the biographer, but hazardous unless ample corroborative evidence is at hand. In this case, however, we have not a shred of contemporary evidence as to Kleist's psychic condition between Oct. 5, 1803 and June, 1804, except his letter written at St. Omer. We have to rely upon preceding and succeeding documents, upon general considerations and oral tradition traceable ultimately to Kleist himself or to his traveling companion, Pfuel, who fails us for all events subsequent to the disappearance from Paris.

New data make it possible now to set the events in their proper chronological order, and the writer hopes to

interpret the whole episode more satisfactorily by a reconsideration of all available evidence.

Aside from Kleist's actual suicide in November, 1811, which caused many people to reconstruct their notions of the poet's whole life in the light of what they believed its end to be, there are principally two things which have been drawn upon for this obscure period: (1) certain reports by Pfuel, and (2) letters by Kleist himself, one of June 24, 1804, to Ulrike von Kleist, and another of July 29, 1804, to Henriette von Schlieben, of Dresden.

Pfuel seems to have been somewhat gossipy about his friendship with Kleist. He related to several persons at different times the events of the journey from Dresden *via* Berne, Milan, Geneva, and Lyons to Paris, with its abrupt termination in October, 1803. The variations of his story show that his memory was not very clear, or that he was not very careful in regard to details. (v. Biedermann's *Gespräche*, pp. 96 ff.) What seems reasonably certain from these sources is, that Kleist's moods ranged between great hopefulness and deep depression, as the prospects of finishing his tragedy of *Robert Guiskard* rose and fell. As the difficulties seemed to increase, the moods of depression became preponderant, and from time to time suicide seemed the only escape. There is no good reason to doubt that Kleist asked Pfuel on more than one occasion to join him in a double suicide. But there is little, if anything, in Pfuel's various accounts to justify the view usually held, that the desire for suicide was due to an insane impulse. Ambition and pride coupled with peculiar adversities were the cause.

Wieland's letter to Dr. Wedekind of Mainz, April 10, 1804, suggests a number of elements which, taken together, make up a very fair diagnosis of Kleist's condition, though the emphasis on single items might be shifted:

(1) "seinen auf Selbstgefühl gegründeten, aber von seinem Schicksal gewaltsam niedergedrückten Stolz"; (2) "die Excentricität der ganzen Laufbahn, worin er sich, seitdem er aus der militärischen Karriere ausgetreten, hin und her bewegt hat"; (3) "seine fürchterliche Überspannung"; (4) "sein fruchtloses Streben nach einem unerreichbaren Zauberbild von Vollkommenheit in seinem bereits zur fixen Idee gewordenen *Guiskard*"; (5) "seine zerrüttete geschwächte Gesundheit"; (6) "die Miszverhältnisse, worin er mit seiner Familie zu stehen scheint."¹

A review of Kleist's early life and extracts from his intimate letters will show that the elder Wieland judged the case very well, but at the same time indicate that the emphasis is to be laid primarily upon the external conditions and the temperament of the poet, and only secondarily upon the transient state of his health and his ill success with the *Guiskard*.

Kleist was born into a family with almost exclusively military traditions. His father was a major in the Prussian army, his grandfather a captain of staff, and scores of his kinsmen had been or were army officers. To break with such a tradition was in itself almost a calamity.

Moreover, he was born under a benevolent despotism, whose favorite implement of rule was the army. His childhood fell in the last nine years of the reign of Frederick the Great. To forsake the army for any other career whatsoever in such a militaristic state, was at once to forfeit the favor of the king.

Add to this the fact that Kleist belonged to a family of the oldest nobility, a family over five hundred years old, whose traditions absolutely precluded the choice of cer-

¹ Biedermann, *Heinrich von Kleists Gespräche*, pp. 77 ff.

tain careers open to the middle and lower classes, whose inheritance was an intense pride and consciousness of rank, however much softened by philosophy. Such a man might serve in the army, the civil service, the Church, the university, but a literary career was frowned upon by his class.

Again, Kleist's father died when his son was but eleven years old, leaving him under guardianship² with a fortune too small to support him even in the most modest fashion. His mother died a few years later. During his tutelage additional help was needed. The kinsfolk upon whom he could count for aid were two, his half-sister Ulrike, who helped him financially from time to time, and a distant cousin, Marie von Kleist, who was an intimate friend of the new queen and could help him through her influence at court.

Through the latter young Kleist received his appointment as "Gefreiter Corporal" in the regiment of Royal Guards stationed at Potsdam. This was the king's favorite regiment. The boy was but fifteen years old and there was prospect of promotion. A brilliant military career was before him. The king felt that he had strained a few points in young Kleist's favor to please his queen's good friend. The Kleist family rejoiced, and had every reason to rejoice at the signal favor shown the boy. He was well provided for, in spite of his orphanage and his reduced estates.

But two things were fatal to the permanency of this arrangement: (1) Kleist's tastes and temperament, and (2) the scale of living of the regiment of Royal Guards. Salaries were not sufficient and the needed additions

² Kleist's tutelage lasted till he was twenty-four years old. "Ich bin in einem Jahr majorenn" (v. Letter to Ulrike, October 27, 1800).

either ate into the principal of his estate or had to be advanced by Ulrike or other members of the family, a fact which justified their desire to advise him in any juncture of affairs.

For the time being the former was the more important. The disciple of Rousseau, who came to look upon self-culture as the only worthy aim in life, became disgusted with the mechanical slavery and degrading routine of the army. After enduring seven years of such existence Kleist petitioned to be released, giving as his reason a desire to continue his studies at the university. The king granted the request, though grudgingly. At the express royal command Kleist made the following definite promise:

“Nachdem Sr. Königlichen Majestät von Preuszen mir Endesunterschiedenem den aus freier Entschliesung und aus eigenem Antriebe um meine Studia zu vollenden allerunterthänigst nachgesuchten Abschied aus Höchst Dero Kriegsdiensten in Gnaden bewilliget: so reversiere ich mich hierdurch auf Höchst Dero ausdrücklichen Befehl: dasz ich weder ohne Dero allerhöchsten Konsens jemals in auswärtige Kriegs- oder Zivildienste treten, noch in Höchstdero Staaten wiederum in Königl. Kriegsdienste aufgenommen zu werden, anhalten will; dagegen ich mir vorbehalte, nach Absolvierung meiner Studia Seiner Majestät dem Könige und dem Vaterlande im Zivilstande zu dienen. Diesen wohlüberdachten Revers habe ich eigenhändig ge- und unterschrieben. So geschehen Frankfurt a. Oder den 17. April 1799. Heinrich von Kleist, vormals Lieut. im Regt. Garde.”

Thus at one stroke Kleist forfeited the good-will and active favor of the king, and disappointed and angered his family, who could see in his act nothing but the most stupid and irresponsible folly. From now on he had to

live on the proceeds or principal of his estates and what could be wrung from others, chiefly from the self-sacrificing Ulrike.

Now begins a period of half-conscious, if not quite wholly intentional dissembling. Kleist had to meet in a fashion the wishes of his family, or give up his career of self-culture at the university. He represented to the king and to his family that he intended preparing for a career in the civil service. However, he did almost nothing in that direction during his three semesters at Frankfurt, and the family became impatient. They insisted upon his preparing for an 'Amt.' They wanted him to choose some 'Brotstudium.'

To complicate matters still further Kleist became enamoured of a young friend of his sister, and his love was returned after a fashion. She was Wilhelmine von Zenge, daughter of Maj.-Gen. von Zenge, then in charge of the regiment stationed at Frankfurt. Her parents consented to the betrothal on one condition, that the marriage should not take place until Kleist had an 'Amt.' This merely intensified those "Miszverhältnisse zu seiner Familie"; for here was another group of persons whose wishes were to be considered and whose feelings were to be conciliated by a dissembling wholly foreign to Kleist's temperament.

Add to this the mysterious journey to Würzburg for medical or surgical treatment, his unsettled position in the finance department in Berlin after his return, his reported unwillingness to perform distasteful services required of him, the constant financial drain on his own and the family's resources, his hypersensitive attitude toward those on whom he depended or toward whom he had obligations, the gradual wear of such unsatisfactory conditions upon his health already threatened by intense study, the shock of disappointment at finding his desire of abso-

lute knowledge negatived by the convincing logic of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, and the result was—a journey to Paris to escape it all.

Against all this only too well grounded distrust and opposition, and these very intelligible and wholly excusable, even commendable demands of his family, Kleist had only *one thing* to set: *his genius*. Of this he alone could judge. He alone could have confidence in it, and its ultimate triumph. As yet he had accomplished nothing more by it than to break from old bonds.

The journey to Paris was not without its keen disappointments. He was under many obligations to Ulrike and had previously given her a promise not to travel in foreign lands without her company. He kept his promise. But thus he was no longer able to travel on his mere matriculation card. He had to secure passports for both. To secure them he had to give a reason for his journey. He could not tell the truth; so he told a half-truth. His object was a *desire to learn*. This was understood to mean study at the University of Paris, and his friends armed him with letters of introduction to various scholars there. The dissimulation had to be kept up by actual calls upon these persons. These letters and these supposed plans of study awakened “expectations” in friends outside the family circle, which Kleist knew he could not fulfill, and he disliked to return and meet them, and have to confess that he had *tried* nothing, *accomplished* nothing.

Under such circumstances, he endured Paris a few months, and then went to Switzerland. The fruit of this journey was his first tragedy, *Die Familie Ghonorez*, or as now named, *Die Familie Schroffenstein*. It aroused some interest, some favorable comment, but the ‘Honorar’ was not paid, and he himself soon became unjustly harsh in his criticism of it. It certainly was not an “elende

Scharteke," as he called it. However promising, it was not the work with which he dared to return home, face his family, and claim his bride. Its financial returns did not render an 'Amt' any the less necessary. Meanwhile a second drama had dawned upon him, and this seemed so much greater that it promised to be a full justification of his course of life in opposition to tradition, king, fate, family, bride, and learned friends. It treated the Death of Robert Guiskard the Norman. The fragment we have of it shows that it would have been a magnificent drama, if completed, perhaps unsurpassed in all German literature. It deserved Kleist's best devotion as well as the elder Wieland's high praise. Whether we assume that his ideal was too high—a union of classic and romantic styles—or that his powers were too weak ("die halben Talente"), or that he was supersensitive to such defects as had marred his first drama, the one fact is apparent, and of the utmost importance: *Kleist stakes his last hope on this tragedy of Robert Guiskard*. It is to be his justification, his redemption, the only draught that will satisfy his thirst for glory.

Hindrances were constantly thrust in his way. Thwarted in his dream of an idyllic life at Thun, breaking with his bride who would not consent to help him realize a Rousseauistic return to nature, interrupted by months of illness, driven by political accident from Switzerland to Weimar, to Wieland, driven again to Leipzig to escape a new love affair with Wieland's daughter, hounded everywhere by poverty (for his own estate was not wholly exhausted and he was to depend henceforth on charity or his literary earnings), he did not make satisfactory progress with his tragedy. It would have been a marvel if he had done so.

A few passages from Kleist's letters to Ulrike at Frank-

furt, and to other friends, will throw light upon his actions and motives, and completely justify the view we have presented above:

“Es ist wahrscheinlich, dasz ich nie in mein Vaterland zurückkehre” (to C. von Schlieben, Paris, July 18, 1801).

“Mein liebes Ulrikchen, zurückzukehren zu Euch ist, so unaussprechlich ich Euch auch liebe, doch unmöglich, unmöglich. Ich will lieber das Äusserste ertragen.—Lasz mich. Erwinnere mich nicht mehr daran. Wenn ich auch zurückkehrte, so würde ich doch gewisz, gewisz, ein Amt nicht nehmen. Das ist nun einmal abgetan. Dir selbst musz es einleuchten, dasz ich für die üblichen Verhältnisse gar nicht mehr passe.” —“Darum eben sträube ich mich so gegen die Rückkehr, denn unmöglich wäre es mir, hinzutreten vor jene Menschen, die mit Hoffnungen auf mich sahen, unmöglich ihnen zu antworten, wenn sie mich fragen: wie hast du sie erfüllt? Ich bin nicht was die Menschen von mir halten, mich drücken ihre Erwartungen.—Ach es ist unverantwortlich, den Ehrgeiz in uns zu erwecken, einer Furie zum Raub sind wir hingegeben.—Aber nur in der Welt wenig zu sein, ist schmerzhaft, auszer ihr nicht” (to Ulrike, Bern, Jan. 12, 1802).

“Ich arbeite unaufhörlich um Befreiung von der Verbannung—du verstehst mich. Vielleicht bin ich in einem Jahr wieder bei Euch” (to Ulrike, Delosea Insel, May 1, 1802).

“Ich werde wahrscheinlicher Weise niemals in mein Vaterland zurückkehren. Ihr Weiber versteht in der Regel ein Wort in der deutschen Sprache nicht, es heiszt Ehrgeiz. Es ist nur ein einziger Fall, in welchem ich zurückkehre, wenn ich der Erwartung

der Menschen, die ich thörichtester Weise durch eine Menge von prahlerischen Schritten gereizt habe, entsprechen kann. Der Fall ist möglich, aber nicht wahrscheinlich. Kurz, kann ich nicht mit Ruhm im Vaterland erscheinen, geschieht es nie. Das ist entschieden, wie die Natur meiner Seele" (to Wilhelmine, Delosea Insel, May 20, 1802).

"Wenn ihr mich in Ruhe ein Paar Monate bei Euch arbeiten lassen wolltet, ohne mich mit Angst, was aus mir werden werde, rasend zu machen, so würde ich—ja ich würde!" (to Ulrike, Leipzig, Mar. 14, 1803).

"Ich erbitte mir also von dir, meine Teure, so viel Fristung meines Lebens, als nötig ist, seiner grossen Bestimmung völlig genug zu tun." "Du wirst mir gern zu dem einzigen Vergnügen helfen, das, sei es noch so spät, gewisz in der Zukunft meiner wartet, ich meine, mir den Kranz der Unsterblichkeit zusammenzupflücken" (to Ulrike, Dresden, July 3, 1803).

"Und so soll ich denn niemals zu Euch, meine teuersten Menschen, zurückkehren? O, niemals! Rede mir nicht zu. Wenn du es thust, so kennst du das gefährliche Ding nicht, das man Ehrgeiz nennt" (to Ulrike, Geneva, Oct. 5, 1803).

In this mood Kleist goes with Pfuel to Paris. The desire for death as the only solution of such a tangled destiny is only too explainable. His attempted suicide in 1803 may appear to us now, just as his actual suicide in November, 1811, did to Pfuel himself, as a most natural and justifiable act. Pfuel classified Kleist's friends at that time into two groups, (1) those who were Christians first and Kleist's friends afterwards, and (2) those who were first of all Kleist's friends and then Christians. The former were horrified at the suicide and heaped con-

demnation upon their former friend: the latter weighed Kleist's act against the undeserved wretchedness of his fate, and understood and pardoned it, and remained his friends, in spite of their Christian professions.

When we consider Kleist's rationalistic deism, his naïve belief in the soul's continued existence in a sphere free from the annoyances and limitations of the life in the flesh ("auf einem andern Stern"), where it might continue its progress toward infinite perfection, there seems to be something in the motive to his act akin to the old Stoic doctrine of the "open door" through which one may retire at will to escape dishonor.

That is, there is nothing in the evidence drawn from the period preceding the episode, which compels us to ascribe to Kleist any disorder of mind bordering on insanity or constituting real mania.

We will now turn to the passages from the subsequent correspondence which refer to these matters.

Home again in Berlin, ambition, at least literary ambition, crushed out, humbled before his family, Kleist yields the point in dispute, and consents to make an effort to secure appointment to an 'Amt.' He reports his experience at the court thus (to Ulrike, Jun. 24, 1804):

"Ich kam Dienstags Morgens mit Ernst und Gleisenberg hier an, musste, weil der König abwesend war, den Mittwoch und Donnerstag versäumen, fuhr dann am Freitag nach Charlottenburg, wo ich Kökritz³ endlich im Schlosse fand. Er empfing mich mit einem finstern Gesichte, und antwortete auf meine Frage, ob ich die Ehre

³ Karl Leopold von Köckeritz, General Major from 1803 on, was a very incompetent man, who, however, as the favorite of the king, Friedrich Wilhelm III., was much sought after for his reputed personal influence in securing appointments to the various branches of the government service (v. *Allg. Deutsch. Biog.*, xvi, p. 416).

hätte, von ihm gekannt zu sein, mit einem kurzen: ja. Ich käme, fuhr ich fort, ihn in meiner wunderlichen Angelegenheit um Rat zu fragen. Der Marquis von Lucchesini hätte einen sonderbaren Brief, den ich ihm aus St. Omer zugeschickt, dem Könige vorgelegt. Dieser Brief müsse unverkennbare Zeichen einer Gemütskrankheit enthalten, und ich unterstünde mich, von Sr. Majestät Gerechtigkeit zu hoffen, dasz er vor keinen politischen Richterstuhl gezogen werden würde. Ob diese Hoffnung gegründet wäre? Und ob ich, wiederhergestellt, wie ich mich fühlte, auf die Erfüllung einer Bitte um Anstellung rechnen dürfe, wenn ich wagte, sie Sr. Majestät vorzutragen? Darauf versetzte er nach einer Weile: 'sind Sie wirklich jetzt hergestellt?—Ich meine,' fuhr er, da ich ihn befremdet ansah, mit Heftigkeit fort, 'ob Sie von allen Ideen und Schwindeln, die vor kurzem im Schwange waren, (er gebrauchte diese Wörter) völlig hergestellt sind?'—Ich verstünde ihn nicht, antwortete ich mit so vieler Ruhe als ich zusammenfassen konnte; ich wäre körperlich krank gewesen, und fühlte mich, bis auf eine gewisse Schwäche, die das Bad vielleicht heben würde, so ziemlich wiederhergestellt. Er nahm das Schnupftuch aus der Tasche und schnäubte sich. 'Wenn er mir die Wahrheit gestehen solle' fing er an, und zeigte mir jetzt ein weit besseres Gesicht, als vorher, 'so könne er mir nicht verhehlen, dasz er sehr ungünstig von mir denke. Ich hätte das Militair verlassen, dem Civil den Rücken gekehrt, das Ausland durchstreift, mich in der Schweiz ankaufen wollen, Versuche gemacht (O meine teure Ulrike), die Landung mitmachen wollen, usw., usw., usw. Überdies sei des Königs Grundsatz, Männer, die aus dem Militair ins Civil übergangen, nicht besonders zu protegieren. Er könne nichts für mich tun.'—Mir traten wirklich die Tränen in die

Augen. Ich sagte, ich wäre im Stande, ihm eine ganz andere Erklärung aller dieser Schritte zu geben, eine ganz andere gewisz, als er vermutete. Jene Einschiffungsgeschichte, z. B. hätte gar keine politischen Motive gehabt, sie gehöre vor das Forum eines Arztes, weit eher, als des Cabinets. Ich hätte bei einer fixen Idee einen gewissen Schmerz im Kopfe empfunden, der unerträglich heftig steigernd, mir das Bedürfnis nach Zerstreuung so dringend gemacht hätte, dasz ich zuletzt in die Verwechslung der Erdachse gewilligt haben würde, ihn los zu werden. Es wäre doch grausam, wenn man einen Kranken verantwortlich machen wollte für Handlungen, die er im Anfall von Schmerzen beging.—Er schien mich nicht ganz ohne Teilnahme anzuhören.—Was jenen Grundsatz des Königs beträfe, fuhr ich fort, so könne er des Königs Grundsatz nicht immer gewesen sein. Denn Se. Majestät hätten die Gnade gehabt, mich mit dem Versprechen einer Wiederanstellung zu entlassen: ein Versprechen, an dessen Nichterfüllung ich nicht glauben könne, so lange ich mich seiner noch nicht völlig unwürdig gemacht hätte.—Er schien wirklich auf einen Augenblick unschlüssig. Doch die zwangvolle Wendung, die er jetzt plötzlich nahm, zeigte nur zu gut, was man bereits am Hofe über mich beschlossen hatte. Denn er holte mit einem Male das alte Gesicht wieder hervor und sagte: ‘Es wird Ihnen zu nichts helfen. Der König hat eine vorgefaszte Meinung gegen Sie. Ich zweifle, dasz Sie sie ihm benehmen werden, etc., etc.’ ”

About a month later (July 29, 1804) he gives a different account of the episode under discussion in a letter to his friend Henriette von Schlieben in Dresden: “Von dort aus (Varese, Madonna del Monte) bin ich, wie von der Furie getrieben, Frankreich von Neuem mit blinder

Unruhe in zwei Richtungen durchreist, über Genf, Lyon, Paris, nach Boulogne-sur-mer gegangen, wo ich, wenn Bonaparte sich damals wirklich nach England mit dem Heere eingeschifft hätte, aus Lebensüberdruß einen rasenden Streich begangen haben würde; sodann von da wieder zurück über Paris nach Mainz, wo ich endlich krank niedersank, und nahe an fünf Monaten abwechselnd das Bett oder das Zimmer gehütet habe. Ich bin nicht im Stande vernünftigen Menschen einigen Aufschluß über diese seltsame Reise zu geben. Ich selber habe seit meiner Krankheit die Einsicht in ihre Motiven verloren, und begreife nicht mehr, wie gewisse Dinge auf andre erfolgen konnten."

This later note assigns 'Lebensüberdruß' as the motive for his attempted death in the descent upon England, and this is consistent with Kleist's preceding experience, as we have shown. Surely the explanation offered Köckritz, that it was a 'Gemütskrankheit' of such a degree as to relieve him of all responsibility, is something more than 'Lebensüberdruß.' That he has lost all insight into his motives, is surely not quite consistent with the claim made to Köckritz, that he could explain the whole affair so satisfactorily that all blame must disappear.

The above-quoted letter to Ulrike is generally accepted by Kleist's biographers at its face value. This displays 'Pietät,' but is curious in view of Kleist's own confession that he could give no account of the matter to reasonable men, and had himself lost all insight into his motives. We must remember that Kleist is seeking from an incensed monarch reinstatement into office to please an insistent and disappointed family. As he had dissembled before in respect to his 'Amt,' and had not shrunk from actual falsification in regard to details of his Würzburg journey, had resorted to a trick hardly distinguishable from open

fraud to get a matriculation card at Leipzig University, made a disingenuous and mostly false representation of his object in going to Paris the first time, in order to secure passports, we must not shut our eyes to the possibility of distortion, if not misrepresentation, here. He had the strongest possible motive to throw the most favorable light upon the whole episode.

The act had been given political significance by King and Cabinet.—“Ideen und Schwindeln, die vor kurzem im Schwange waren.” Kleist’s evident anxiety to secure a promise that the letter would not be taken before a cabinet or military tribunal, is confession that the contents were of a political nature. King and Cabinet had apparently concluded from Kleist’s desire to join Napoleon’s army, that he was affected by the principles of the French Revolution, whose embodiment they saw in the First Consul.⁴ Such sympathy was then abundant in the western portions of Prussia, and even in the capital. Accordingly, Kleist denies that his desire to join Napoleon’s army had any political motives, and offers to explain it in a way wholly unsuspected by Köckritz. The explanation turns out to be an excuse, ‘Kopfschmerzen’ caused by a ‘fixe Idee,’ that demanded ‘Zerstreuung,’ which he sought in this military escapade, for which it would be

⁴ “Im Allgemeinen dürfte man sagen, dass der gegen früher bemerkbare Unterschied darin bestand, dass, während es sich bisher um allgemeine Freiheitsverherrlichung gehandelt hatte, nun die spezielle Vorliebe für Frankreich, besonders für Napoleon als den Retter aus der Not, sich hervorwagte.” Geiger, *Berlin*, Bd. II, p. 56. Cf. Gentz’s opinion of the French Revolution cited *ibid.*, p. 42; also the Berlinese estimate of Napoleon as “der neu entstandene ägyptische Prophet Bonaparte”—“einen von Gott hoch erleuchteten, geistvollen Mann, von dessen Seite alles Gute herkomme” (1799, *ibid.*, p. 57).

cruel to hold him responsible, since it was due to such sufferings.

Whether this explanation explains, may be left to the acumen of the reader. However, it may not be necessary to assume an intentional misrepresentation. It is possible that Kleist had passed through certain psychological and political crises within a few months' time, which made it impossible for him to see his past actions in their true light. An intensely imaginative person is inclined to use his own past as material for artistic reconstruction, just as he would use any other historical data. This elaboration may be conscious or unconscious. In such persons uncontrolled memory may be very unreliable, though no intention to distort is present. Intense feelings have still greater power than the imagination to disturb the normal process of remembering. Kleist was a man of unsurpassed imaginative powers and of unequalled intensity of feeling. His memory may have been peculiarly unreliable.

An examination of the historic background of this period is needed as a control in the interpretation of the letters and of the whole episode to which they refer.

For the present, the most patent fact in the record of the visit to Köckritz at the palace is the existence of a letter from Kleist, which is in the hands of the king. It is clear that its contents could be interpreted in such a way as to incriminate the writer. We have seen how Kleist tried to break the force of this interpretation by ascribing to his letter "*unverkennbare Zeichen einer Gemütskrankheit*," which had certainly not been recognized by his Majesty's Cabinet.

Unfortunately, this letter is lost. It is not in the Kgl. Geheim. Staatsarchiv, and is not likely to have been preserved elsewhere. One might hazard a surmise that

powerful and interested hands, possibly no other than those of Marie von Kleist, the queen's friend and Kleist's good genius at court, were able to get possession of it and destroy it, in order to keep it from appearing before a tribunal. As to its contents, we are left to make shrewd guesses based upon references to it.

We know that it was written by Kleist to Marquis von Lucchesini, Prussian ambassador at Paris, and forwarded by him to the king, Friedrich Wilhelm III. at Berlin. New evidence helps us to be a little more specific. Most of the biographers merely affirm that it requested passports, which were sent at once, but in such a form as to compel a return to Potsdam. But it must have contained something much more important than a simple request for passports, or the ambassador would not have sent it on to the king, and the king would not have been so angered by it. Ulrike's account⁵ says that Kleist begged the king's permission to join the expedition against England. She was with her half-brother almost immediately after his return to Berlin, and enjoyed his confidence more than any other person; so that this testimony is tolerably direct. It is probable enough in itself that Kleist would ask such permission, after solemnly pledging the king, in the above-cited 'Revers,' not to enter the military service of any foreign power without the royal consent. The words of Köckritz show that King and Cabinet are in possession of knowledge concerning his plan to join the forces at Boulogne, which could hardly have been derived from any other source than Kleist's own letter, unless the ambassador's report contained it, and he would have been wholly dependent upon the original letter. The other matters mentioned by Köckritz, the withdrawal from the

⁵ Biedermann, *l. c.*, pp. 53 ff.

army, the desertion of the civil service, his travels in foreign parts, his plan of settlement in Switzerland, his literary work, were all matters of common knowledge in military and government circles in Berlin, so that only the Napoleonic episode need be referred to the lost letter. To prove still more conclusively that this information did not come through the regular ambassadorial report from Paris, I insert here the text of Marquis von Lucchesini's report, which has been kindly furnished me by the Kgl. Geheim. Staats-archiv in Berlin. It bears the date Oct. 31, 1803, and is as follows: "Un jeune Mr. de Kleist, ci-devant officier au premier bataillon des gardes, qu'un désir vague d'instruction avait ramené depuis trois semaines à Paris avec le Sr. de Pfuel, avait disparu à l'improviste et nous a fait craindre pour sa vie. Je viens d'apprendre dans ce moment que sans se munir de mes passeports et sans aucune autorisation de la police de Paris, il est allé à St. Omer, où il pouvait courir le risque mérité, surtout en temps de guerre, d'être arrêté comme suspect et compromettre aussi la protection que sa qualité de sujet Prussien lui assurait ici."

Having considered the circumstances which led up to the incidents in question, and having examined the subsequent references to them, in both cases showing that reasons exist for modifying the current views in the direction of greater moderation, an emphasis of the sanity of the poet at that period, rather than an exaggeration of his abnormality, we will now take up the extant St. Omer letter itself, the only documentary evidence of unquestioned validity, to see whether it contains elements which necessarily point to madness.

I believe that anyone taking up the letter for a first reading, without being prejudiced by the legend handed

down by the biographers, will find a certain intensity of phraseology, an exaltation of spirit, such as is found on page after page of Kleist's literary works, but nothing more, nothing unusual, nothing abnormal, if he takes the poet's well-ascertained temperament as the norm, rather than that foolish abstraction, an average man. Confused or disordered the letter certainly is not. No intellectual disturbance is betrayed by a lack of perspicacity. It is certainly far removed from the "wildest ecstasy." The words do not "fall like pyramids, each greater and mightier than the preceding." They do not "overtopple one another."

Whether the whole scheme deserves to be called "den kopflosen Plan," "der wahnwitzige Vorsatz" (Brahm), or "gerade das Irrsinnigste, das seinem Innern am schärfsten widersprach" (Herzog), may be judged from the following considerations.

While involving what seem to us errors of judgment, it was not more impractical than other plans of Kleist which have been explained without recourse to mania. Cf. plans of marriage, made in Berlin, which involved renunciation of all prejudices of rank and claims of family tradition, and a domestic establishment supported on his estates, while he devoted himself to self-culture: also the plan of settlement in Switzerland, as a 'Bauer,' to realize his dream of a return to Nature: also his whole dream of a union of Austria and Prussia against Napoleon under the hegemony of Austria: etc., etc.

Kleist wished to cast away his life. The French army was mustering at Boulogne-sur-mer. It was officially given out that a descent was to be made upon England. Napoleon, to be sure, in a conversation with Metternich⁶ at a

⁶ *Memoirs of Prince Metternich*, Vol. I, p. 48, foot-note.

later date, denied that he had ever really intended to attempt the invasion, and assured him that he was keeping the English navy occupied while gathering strength against Austria. The naval officers of England also refused to believe in the imminence of an attack of that sort; but the army officers and the English people generally believed in the danger. All Europe seems to have believed in the feasibility of the descent and in Napoleon's intention to strike the threatened blow, when the favorable conjunction of events should arise. Good English publicists of today still express their belief in the reality of the menace, though confident of disastrous results, if a landing had been attempted, or even successfully made. German officials of today are said to entertain some such plan of descent in case an Anglo-German war should have to be waged. If Kleist believed in the imminence of the attack, and considered it unusually hazardous, and likely to offer him a military death, he was simply one among thousands of intelligent Europeans who entertained the same beliefs.

Further, though Kleist was disappointed in the society and learning of Paris, and called the Parisians "*Affen der Vernunft*," and after 1805 became the bitterest hater of Napoleon, we have no right or reason, either to assume that the poet confused Napoleon, the incarnation of the spirit of human liberty, with those Parisian '*Affen*,' or to antedate his hatred of the Consul. Previous to 1805 Kleist was rather individualistic and unpolitical, not national but cosmopolitan. Though he bore a part in the war of the First Coalition for the restoration of the royal family of France, he longed for peace, for an opportunity to redeem in some more humane way the time they were killing so immorally in the campaign. With such an attitude, he must have greeted the peace of Basel and Prussian

neutrality with great satisfaction, as the majority of Prussians of his time did. He probably shared in the general sympathy of the Prussians with the French Republic, with its great principles, at least.⁷ He may have been shocked at the regicide and the excesses of the republicans, but enthusiastic over the return of Bonaparte from Egypt, and the establishment of the Consulate. We may properly conceive of Kleist as sharing the general Prussian opinion, that Napoleon, by the treaties of Lunéville and Amiens, was the founder and powerful guarantor of European peace.⁸ This is not a pleasant chapter for the Prussian of today, but he should not allow mere sentiment to distort his presentation of fact. Napoleon was not considered Prussia's 'Erbfeind.' In fact the alliance between the Napoleonic consular government and the Prussian monarchy was closer than that of the latter with any other Continental power.⁹ Though Prussia was nominally neu-

⁷ V. Gentz's opinion of the French Revolution. "Wie Gentz dachten auch die übrigen Kreise der höher Gebildeten" (Geiger, *l. c.*, p. 42).

⁸ "Quant à la Prusse, elle avait seule à se plaindre des stipulations secrètes du traité de Campo Formio; mais elle conservait encore la croyance, malheureusement erronée, que l'intention du premier consul était réellement de pacifier l'Europe, comme de la préserver de tout bouleversement intérieur" (Hardenberg, *Mémoires tirés des Papiers d'un Homme d'État*, tome huitième, p. 16). "Aussi l'annonce de la paix de Lunéville produisait-elle une allégresse vive et générale. Dans les transports qu'elle fit éprouver on croyait voir succéder la plus brillante prospérité à l'oppression dont on avait souffert, et les espérances à cet égard n'avaient pas plus de bornes que les désirs toujours exagérés du vulgaire" (*ibid.*, p. 49).

⁹ "Mais arrêtons-nous ici aux intérêts de la Prusse qui se lient essentiellement à ceux de la France, etc." (Hardenberg, *l. c.*, p. 227). "Puis, tandis que l'Empire tombait en ruine, le premier consul semblait vouloir rendre la Prusse assez puissante pour devenir la protectrice de l'Allemagne septentrionale, intention, qu'il ne cessa de manifester jusqu'à l'époque de la rupture du traité d'Amiens"

tral, the only thing which, on various occasions, prevented her from allying herself with France against England was the well-grounded fear that the latter's navy would instantly ruin her commerce in the Baltic and elsewhere. Kleist's desire to enter Napoleon's service was not therefore an evidence of mental disorder.

The expression " *unser aller Verderben lauert über den Meeren* " has caused some difficulty. Herzog's facile assertion that the whole conception is transferred to the sphere of historic reality from the drama *Robert Guiskard* is certainly ill-grounded. A little attention to the drama itself should have prevented this error. The destruction of all the Normans does not lie in wait for them beyond seas. Its source is the pest raging in the camp before the walls of Stamboul, and the people plead to be led beyond seas as the only means of escape from universal destruction.

Franz Muncker's interpretation might be accepted at once as the simplest and most natural, if not too obvious. ' *Unser aller* ' refers to the French army of invasion, and the ' *Verderben* ' is the disastrous result likely to attend an attempt to cross the Channel in spite of the watchful British Channel fleet.

Another interpretation is possible. ' *Unser aller* ' may refer to Kleist's countrymen, or even to Europeans in general, and ' *Verderben* ' may have a larger sense, as the ruin of European prosperity under England's commercial policy. England's insistence upon the ' *dominium maris* ' and her practical control of commerce put all Europe at

(p. 240). " *Le roi avait même assez de peine à résister aux instances de Bonaparte pour s'unir à lui contre l'Angleterre... et il était dans la politique de Frédéric Guillaume de n'avoir à combattre ni pour ni contre la France* " (p. 345).

her mercy.¹⁰ This forced Prussia at one time into a hostile league of the northern powers against England. Also England's money, in form of subsidies and gratuities at the European courts, came near being all powerful in moulding the policies of these courts in war and peace. Just at the time of this military project England was in nominal isolation, as a result of the peace of Amiens; but her agents and her gold were at work preparing a new curb to the power of Napoleon. This meant war, war in which Prussia could not maintain her neutrality, war hateful to all whose advantages depended upon the maintenance of peace. England's dogged fight against Napoleon might seem, and did seem to many, an unjustifiable assault upon the Protector of Europe, the great Pacifier. If this interpretation should prove correct, then Kleist could feel that his life would not merely be terminated, but sacrificed against a common enemy. At present the historical evidence is not complete enough to be decisive.

On either interpretation Kleist's conduct is not 'kopflos' nor 'wahnsinnig' but based on a sensible view of the situation.

¹⁰ "Car son acceptation (the cession of Hanover to Prussia) unissait hostilement la Prusse à la France contre le reste de l'Europe maritime ou continentale, et pouvait la précipiter dans une guerre générale et terrible, dont le cours eût été ruineux et l'issue incertaine" (Hardenberg, *l. c.*, p. 266). "Mais l'importance de son (England's) commerce, lié à celui de toute l'Europe, et la prépondérance de sa marine qui la rend agressive partout, vulnérable nulle part, lui impriment une telle vie politique, une telle influence sur la prospérité des autres états, qu'on peut la considérer comme le siège du principe vital du corps social européen" (*ibid.*, p. 219). "Cependant, on se battait de part et d'autre *aux dépens des puissances neutres*. L'Angleterre, en bloquant les côtes dont on lui interdisait le commerce, ruinait celui de la Basse-Allemagne" (1803, *ibid.*, p. 226).

Now, if all this is true, and if his profession to Henriette von Schlieben is trustworthy, how could Kleist lose insight into his motives? Naturally enough, if we remember the dates. October 26, 1803, he is in St. Omer. In November he breaks down at Mainz, his illness caused not so much by physical overwork and overstrain as by the crushing sense of being compelled to return home and face his family and friends, a ruined man without fame and almost without self-respect. He is in his bed or in his room for five months, a recluse from the world, giving scant heed to events in the political arena. In June, 1804 he returns to Berlin to face life with whatever grace he can, and have another trial with his fate.

During this period the banishment of the republican Moreau to America occurs. On March 20, 1804 the Duke d'Enghien, taken in a raid on his asylum at Ettenheim, is put to death by Napoleon's orders.¹¹ It became evident by this sacrifice of republican and of royal prince that Napoleon was making the paths straight to an imperial throne. In June, 1804 he occupied neutral Hanover with his army. Prussian neutrality could not long remain sacred to an ambitious despot who was on the point of throwing off the Consular mask and assuming the imperial title. Instead of a protector of the peace of Europe men now saw in him only the ambitious and unscrupulous autocrat, to whom no obligations were sacred, and with

¹¹ "En Prusse cette nouvelle (the execution of the Duc d'Enghien) causa la sensation la plus douloureuse" (Hardenberg, *l. c.*, p. 332). "La violation du territoire de l'Empire, l'arrestation et le meurtre du duc d'Enghien avait excité hors de la France comme dans son sein la plus vive horreur" (*ibid.*, p. 352). "Événements qui firent plus que jamais fermenter les esprits dans le cabinet prussien, où dominait une opinion politique devenue toute antifranaïaise" (1804, *ibid.*, p. 414).

whom there could be no settled peace. When Kleist emerged from solitude it was into this changed Europe that he came, and he felt as keenly as the rest, possibly more keenly because of his earlier admiration, the terrible menace of the emperor to German independence. From the new point of view of bitter hatred his previous actions must seem inexplicable. His own interpretation, partly unconsciously, partly intentionally, took the hue it bears in his letter to Ulrike concerning the visit to Köckritz.

Thus again in the St. Omer letter no evidence of mental disorder is discoverable, more than is involved in the mere desire to end a wretched life.

The chronology of the events may now be considered. Kleist was in Geneva October 5. He is in St. Omer October 26. October 31 Marquis von Lucchesini reports to Berlin the arrival of the letter of Kleist at the embassy in Paris. This report says that Kleist and Pfuel came to Paris "depuis trois semaines," *i. e.*, about October 10. This is reasonably consistent with a journey from Geneva *via* Lyons to Paris. The date of the sudden flight from Paris is not so definitely ascertainable. As he went "zu Fusz" and the distance from Paris to St. Omer is at least 180 to 200 km., it must have required at least a week, probably longer, though he went "in blinder Unruhe." On the assumption that he wrote to Ulrike at once on arriving, the date of the "quarrel" and departure from Paris must have fallen about the middle of October. Oral tradition says that Kleist received the requested passports "nach vier Tagen."¹² As the request for them arrived in Paris on

¹² No direct evidence as to the speed made by the stage coaches between St. Omer and Paris in 1803 is before me. In 1793 Kleist made a journey from Frankfurt a/O. to Frankfurt a/M. *via* Leipzig, Erfurt, Gotha, Eisenach, Gelnhausen, and Hanau, spending one whole day in Leipzig. The journey of over 450 km. in an air line

the last day of October, it must have been written about the 28th or 29th, after the letter to Ulrike, not before, as implied by Wilbrandt and Brahm. It was written in St. Omer, not at Boulogne. The passports reached him about November 2 or 3, and several days later he must have been back in Paris on his way to Potsdam. Kleist himself says he went to Boulogne. If this is literally true, and Boulogne does not stand merely as a general designation for the whole region in which the army of Napoleon was encamped, he must have gone on from St. Omer to Boulogne while awaiting the passports, for he could not have gone later. This gives some slight color to the other tradition that he was protected by a French Surgeon-Major and taken as his servant to Boulogne.

We are now able to substitute for the incorrect or distorted accounts of previous biographers the following: Kleist and Pfuel arrived in Paris about October 10, 1803, accompanied by Herr and Frau von Werdeck, whom they had met in Switzerland. They spent some days together in pleasant companionship, but in one of his moods of depression, when his future seemed hopeless, Kleist requested Pfuel to join him in suicide. Pfuel refused, and used his strongest arguments to induce Kleist to give up all thoughts of such an end. Kleist had believed Pfuel capable of understanding him, had considered him the only

required just eight days, *i. e.*, seven days' travel. A similar speed would cover the distance from St. Omer to Paris in a fraction over two days. In 1800 the return journey from Würzburg to Berlin, 47 old Prussian miles=220 English miles=254 km., required just five days. This speed would make the St. Omer-Paris trip in less than three days. During one portion of the journey the coach made 4 Pr. m. in five and one-half hours. At this pace the trip from St. Omer to Paris would take about one and one-half days. The correctness of the traditional "nach vier Tagen" may be accepted without question.

man who could appreciate the tragedy of his life and genius. This argument, the most serious of the kind they had yet had, revealed the gulf of misunderstanding between them and intensified Kleist's sense of loneliness. The companionship in death, upon which he had fondly reckoned as a solace, was shown to be a baseless dream. The argument grew heated, became a "quarrel," and Kleist left his lodgings, and departed from the city. While Pfuel and the Werdecks were seeking him in vain, even among the dead in the Morgue, he was traveling northward toward St. Omer, not resolved to seek death alone (Brahm) but to find companionship in death among the French soldiery; not wandering without a goal (Brahm) but with the enlistment in Napoleon's army clearly fixed upon; not seeking death in any form whatever (Brahm), for he shrank from dying without companionship and from execution as a spy, but the honorable death of a soldier in battle. On the way to St. Omer he may well have met a troop of conscripts. There is nothing improbable in the tradition that he tried to substitute himself for one of them and was refused, since these Frenchmen knew what penalty desertion brought, and that such unauthorized evasion of the conscription was desertion, and easily discoverable besides. In St. Omer on October 26 he writes his farewell greetings to his sister Ulrike in words of exalted devotion to her and to his crushed ideal, giving her in a few brief, clear words a sufficient account of his recent movements and his plan of escape from this world's tragedy. Being so near the encampment, he delays some time at St. Omer. On leaving to make the last stage of his journey to the coast he probably meets by chance a French Surgeon-Major whom he had known before in Paris, and who, astonished to find a Prussian citizen without a passport at the seat of war, explains to him his danger of sharing the fate of

another Prussian nobleman, who had recently been arrested and shot as a supposed Russian spy. Revulsion from such an inglorious end (Cf. *Prinz Friedrich von Hom*-capable of understanding him, had considered him the only had yet had, revealed the gulf of misunderstanding be-quis von Lucchesini, at Paris, requesting permission to join the Napoleonic army at Boulogne, possibly adding some reason for the request, and demanding passports guaranteeing his safety while awaiting enlistment or embarkation. This letter, sent from St. Omer about October 28 or 29, arrived in Paris October 31. The ambassador, realizing the delicate situation of Prussia as a neutral state in the war between France and England, and not daring to give official sanction to the enlistment of a Prussian subject, a former military officer, sent the letter on to the king, but without comment, and sent passports to Kleist which forced him to return to Potsdam at once *via* Paris. While waiting for these Kleist was allowed to enjoy the protection of the Surgeon-Major, passing himself for the latter's servant, and thus perhaps accompanied him to Boulogne. On arrival of the passports, about November 2 or 3, Kleist returned at once to Paris. The failure of Napoleon to make the descent had no influence whatsoever in determining this action, as is generally affirmed, on the authority of the letter to Henriette von Schlieben. On arriving in Paris Kleist was apparently in good spirits and was as normal as ever. On his way home, he broke down at Mainz, the first city on the German border. His disease puzzled the physician. It was probably due to the crushing sense of being compelled to return home and face his family—an acknowledged failure, an object of pity or of scorn, or at best a dependent upon charity.

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